

Chapter One

THE NATURAL LANDSCAPE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

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 SOUTHEAST ASIA is a term which became popular during the Far Eastern War 1941-45, to describe those territories of Eastern Asia which lie south of the Tropic of Cancer (Burma, Siam, Indochina and Malaya) and the nearby islands spreading eastwards from the Asiatic continent towards New Guinea. The archipelago section merges eastwards into island groups of the West-Central Pacific, for which reason New Guinea itself may best be considered outside the definition "Southeast Asia," an exclusion justified (a) by its closer physical association with the Australian Continent, (b) by its sparse population of distinctive anthropological type now found principally in Australia, and (c) by the close affinities of its flora and fauna with those of Australia. The northern limit of Southeast Asia extends beyond the Tropic of Cancer to include Upper Burma on the western side, and withdraws south of the tropic to the political boundaries of Siam and Indochina farther east. By this definition, "Southeast Asia" and its off-lying islands sprawl asymmetrically across the Equator and cover a zone not far short of 1,500 miles in radius from a point off the mouth of the Mekong, an area comparable to all Europe and its seas north of the African coast. Thus isolation by great distances, as well as by physical obstructions, is a constant factor in the geographical relation between the various parts of Southeast Asia.

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 In Southeast Asia, that which forms its core and constitutes the geological link between its chief parts is the Sunda Platform, the southernmost continental block of Asia, whose integrity as a land mass has continued, with only minor tectonic disturbances on its fringes, through such long geological periods that it may be compared with those other "permanent" massifs, the Deccan, the Arabian Block and the Laurentian Shield. It is this physical feature which underlies Borneo, Eastern Sumatra, Northern Java and Malaya.

A somewhat similar platform is the common physiographic basis of Australia and New Guinea, forming what is known as the Sahul Shelf, to the east of the East Indian Archipelago.

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241 to a group, the individuals of which choose or are given, every now and again, different portions to cultivate for themselves.

231 Within Southeast Asia the shifting cultivation system has no relation to the needs of domesticated animals. There is no evidence here that the simpler tribes have been primarily cattle grazers, except in so far as all Mongoloid types coming south overland

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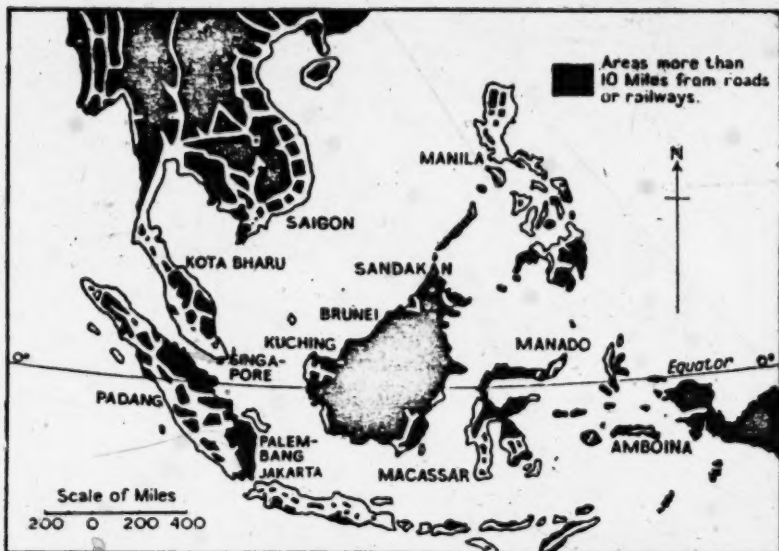


FIG. 111.—The Accessibility of Southeast Asia by Land

231 from the grazing grounds of Tibet and farther north may, at remote times outside this territory, have been associated with animals. Inside Southeast Asia, cattle do not fit well into the ecology of climate, vegetation and pests, and the disinterest in animals has become part of the religious tradition; Buddhists and Hindus do not eat beef, Muslims will not eat pork and even the primitive animists have similar inhibitions. Wherever today there has grown up a cattle system, it relates to the ploughing needs and is concerned with buffaloes or small oxen and does not derive from an earlier tradition of cattle farming or nomadism.

241 Shifting cultivation is a system well adapted to large empty areas where soils are poor and the rate of soil erosion high. As soon as population increases, shifting cultivation, which needs each cutover area to stand unused for 7 to 10 years before being

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disparity could be attributed to replacement of capital equipment, yet it may indicate the beginnings of a great change in the function of Southeast Asia in world trade. Postwar revival by 1950 had become most spectacular in Malaya which, though the smallest political unit of the region, had re-established its trade and was responsible for nearly half the total trade of the region. The Philippines also recovered quickly, to be involved in a quarter of the trade. 439

CONVERGENCE OF ROUTES

This region stands at zones of convergence for transoceanic routes between the very densely populated areas of India and China, and also between those areas and Europe, Australia and North America, so that international shipping is likely to converge upon Southeast Asia independently of purely colonial considerations which have hitherto specially drawn the Philippines into the U.S. shipping circuits, the East Indies into the Dutch, and the rest of Southeast Asia into the British shipping streams. French shipping has been relatively little involved, certainly not more than Danish, Italian and German and far less than the Japanese. 131 • 439

The convergence of shipping routes has left a heritage of convergent air routes which are tending to follow closely the shipping lanes, making Southeast Asia the terminus of the air lanes from North America down through the belt of narrow seas along the West Pacific (linking the United States with Japan, China and Java population centres) and from Europe across the "Eurasian Mediterranean" of Southwest Asia and India, as well as a junction for lines to Australia, although the population and production of the latter scarcely justifies considering it in the long term as a major objective of airways in the way that India and China must continue to be.

CONVERGENCE OF INTERESTS

There is thus much to be coveted in Southeast Asia, the raw materials and the food it produces, the manufactured goods it needs, the commission on the coming and going involved, are all desirable and those who share or have shared in its \$15,000 million 1950 trade turnover are inevitably defensive of their portion. Colonial powers have jealously divided up these assets in the past and it is to be expected that there will always be from India and 433